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## REPORT OF THE CONFERENCE COMMITTEE ON HIGH-SCHOOL ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

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*Committee*

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The committee has understood that it was to give attention principally to the distribution and arrangement of work during the four years of the English course in the secondary school. It has also ventured, however, to outline certain suggestions concerning the course as a whole, which seem at the present time to have definite value. It has seemed fitting, also, to consider briefly the condition of the pupil on entering the secondary school. The report of the committee may be presented, therefore, in three parts.

### *1. The Pupil's Training in English before He Enters the High School*

This should include

1. The power to read reasonably well, both orally and silently; to read seeingly and understandingly; to get the meaning from the printed or written sentence.
2. Considerable knowledge of good literature from reading. This reading should have been largely for interest, and so of easy and simple narrative. It may well have given a reasonably good acquaintance with American authors. It should have kept alive the interest in poetry for which the love of verse-sound and the picture-making faculty of children almost universally open the way.
3. The ability to write freely, naturally, and with reasonable correctness upon simple subjects in which the child is interested. This must result from frequent practice, with only the simplest and least technical knowledge of selection, proportion, and arrangement.
4. Knowledge of the most elementary and important facts of grammar, in logical and coherent form. This knowledge should include

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Twenty-first Educational Conference of the Academies and High Schools in Relations with the University of Chicago, November, 1908.

the forms of the sentence—its elements, the kinds of modifiers, the parts of speech—particularly case and the rules of agreement; also punctuation and capitalization. Grammar should have been studied as a help in understanding and making sentences, and not as a succession of puzzles in construction and analysis.

## II. *General Features of the High-School Course*

1. The course should include a training in composition, with a reasonable amount of rhetorical theory; the reading and study of good literature; and a connected knowledge of the principal facts of the history of English literature. It may under certain conditions include a study of the science of grammar.
2. The amount of time required to accomplish all these ends should not be less than five recitation periods a week throughout the four years of the course.
3. As the powers of thought, expression, and literary appreciation are constantly developing in the pupil, side by side, so the training in composition and the study of literature should be continued side by side throughout the four years, with a gradual increase in the amount and difficulty of the work required. The practice of teaching composition and literature in alternate years, or alternate long periods, is educationally unsound. This mistake is most serious when the subject of composition is dropped permanently at the end of the first or the second year of the high-school course.
4. The course in composition and the theory of composition should receive not less than half the time assigned to English in each year of the course.
5. The course in composition should have as an end the ability of the pupil to speak and to write simple, natural prose with reasonable clearness, correctness, and force.
6. This ability, like every other acquired ability, must be gained through repeated careful practice, directed by an adequate and clearly understood theory, and illuminated by good example. Exercises in writing should therefore be constant throughout the course; such exercises should, in fact, constitute the course in composition, and all rhetorical theory and criticism should be directed to the effective and profitable performance of them. Exercises in oral composition are valuable in themselves, and as an aid to good writing.
7. Rhetoric should therefore be taught as good advice about the pupil's writing and speaking, applied directly to and illustrated by his compositions. The instruction should be confined to the clear

presentation and repeated application of the fundamental principles—unity, coherence, and emphasis—and to good diction.

8. The principal aim in the study of literature should be interest and enjoyment, leading to the love of and desire for good reading. Literature should therefore be presented to the pupil truthfully, as written for the pleasure of the reader, and not falsely, as a difficult task to be performed.
9. Real and lasting enjoyment of literature must be intelligent; the pupil should be required to have a reasonable knowledge of the character and meaning of what he reads, and should be trained to seek such knowledge in his future reading.
10. In view of the last consideration and others, a large part of the time given to literature should be devoted to the greatest English writers, and no time to those without real literary merit.
11. In view of the present tendency to read only fiction, and of the large number of pupils who will have no external incentive to reading after leaving high school, it is the duty of the high school to give the pupil some knowledge of the different forms of literature. A considerable part of the time should therefore be given to the study of the essay, the drama, and poetry.
12. A complete and coherent knowledge of the principal facts of the history of English literature should be given—preferably with the use of a textbook, but possibly without. Logically this part of the course should be placed in the last year. If, however, the great amount of time needed for the advanced work in composition and literature leave no room in the fourth year, the history of literature may be put in the third year.

### III. *A Suggested Outline for the Work of the Different Years*

#### A. COMPOSITION

*First year.*—The preparation suggested in "I" cannot at present be assumed. The aim at first should be to remove the pupil's "inhibition." To this end (a) he should be led to regard written expression as merely a new form of a process already familiar. Therefore he should at first be asked to write, in general, as he talks, and about the same things; he should have frequent exercises in oral composition; he should think of the two forms of expression as easily interchangeable; (b) he should acquire familiarity with the act of writing, through almost constant practice; (c) he should be encouraged by commendation and suggestions for improvement; (c) he should be criticized principally for the interest and general effectiveness of his compositions, with attention to the general ideas of completeness, proportion,

and arrangement. Only gross errors in form should be corrected at first; a necessary review of the grammar involved in the pupil's mistakes may be given in the latter part of the year without interfering with freedom of expression. At the end of the year, the pupil should be able to write freely and naturally on subjects in which he is interested. He should be fairly free from mistakes in punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and grammar. He should have little or no knowledge of the technical rules and terms of rhetoric.

*Second year.*—Beginning with the power to write freely, the pupil should be taught to apply rhetorical principles to his compositions as units, and to their component parts, the paragraphs. This is the year for the study of development and organization of the theme. At the end, the pupil should be able to treat subjects fully, in unified, coherent, emphatic compositions, made up of unified, coherent, emphatic paragraphs.

*Third year.*—The work of the year should include a review of the whole composition and the paragraph; the new work of the year should be the study of the sentence—sentence building, grammar, the rhetorical principles of unity, coherence, and emphasis. At the end of the year, the pupil should be able to write well-developed and organized compositions in correct and effective sentences.

*Fourth year.*—The work should cover, in a way adapted to the maturity of the pupil, the whole ground of "preparatory" composition. The review of the whole composition, the paragraph, and the sentence is of the greatest value. The new subject of study should be the use of words—the number of words, the kind of words, the rules of good use. If time allows, a simple study may be made of the forms of discourse as such, particularly of argument and the writing of briefs in connection therewith.

#### B. LITERATURE

*Four years.*—The study should be based on the reading of "masterpieces" throughout the course, under the guidance of the teacher, with discussion in the classroom and recitations. The principal consideration in "placing" a book should be the ability of the pupil to understand and enjoy it; but the different forms of literature should be presented, and poetry should be part of the course in each year. The reading will naturally begin with narrative prose and poetry. Throughout the course outside reading should be encouraged, and to some extent directed by the instructor, but a part of the pupil's reading should be allowed to remain purely voluntary.